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The Public Sphere, Disclosed

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**Call for
Abstracts**

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The Public Sphere, Disclosed

Spreading digital media, globally acting enterprises and governmental sanctions have jeopardized the fragile relationship of the public and private in recent years. Which role does architecture play here? How are the topics of public and private approached in the design process? Can architecture, urbanism, and landscape architecture influence the relationship of public and private at all? Which understandings of public and private do exist in architecture?

The term “public” has become one of the most important aesthetic, functional, and theoretical terms in the disciplines dealing with built space. Jürgen Habermas’s studies (for example *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, orig. 1962) marked the starting point of the architectural discourse on the public sphere in the German speaking countries, which then gained momentum by the political movements at the end of the 1960s. Subsequent studies followed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (*Public Sphere and Experience*, orig. 1972), and Lucian Hölscher (*Öffentlichkeit und Geheimnis*, 1979). In English speaking countries, publications such as Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1963), Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander’s *Community and Privacy* (1964) or Bernard Rudofsky’s *Streets for People. A Primer for Americans* (1969) initiated discourses on the public and its relevance in architecture. In communist countries, the term had a specific meaning and history that has not been studied until today. In Russian speaking countries the word “общественного” is used to address the public sphere, which however tends to mean “the governmental.” It could be relevant for this issue to present and analyze the history of this communist understanding and the changes after December 1991 (dissolution of the Soviet Union).

In architecture, the public sphere is commonly identified with openness, as can be seen, for example, with reference to the *Nolli Plan of Rome* (1748). Looking closer, “the public” sphere is understood as a space open to the sky, empty (of buildings and detailed functional specifications), and sublime (with a meta-personal height and width). Is this a tenable understanding?

Timeline

October 31, 2015

Call for Abstracts; 500 Word maximum, English or German. Abstracts are double-blind-peer-reviewed. Submission of Abstracts to: s.feldhusen@cloud-cuckoo.net

November 16, 2015

Notification of Abstract Acceptance

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Submission of Full Paper to: s.feldhusen@cloud-cuckoo.net

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Informations for Authors

<http://cloud-cuckoo.net/en/in-den-wolken/informationen/>

Here you can find the excerpt from Georgs Simmels *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (1908) in our *Anthology Theory of Architecture*: http://cloud-cuckoo.net/fileadmin/issuess_en/issue_35/excerpt_issue_35.pdf

In architecture, “the public” has been contrasted to “the private.” Architects and architectural theorists presented themselves as defenders of either the private or the public and excoriated the opposite position as either misanthropic or antisocial. At the same time, architectural discourse created the new term of “the semi-public” (for example for a corridor in an apartment building) that was intended to mean the interface between private and public spaces. By doing so, further considerations of the interferences of public and private spheres were not deemed necessary. Under the label of “the public sphere” city squares were designed without deeper questioning the idea of the public or imagining potentially resulting social and political activities. The simple conclusion was that people meet and gather.

Aside from its commonly positive appreciation, the public encounters criticism, too. Integrating a building in its environment in a way that provides openness to the sky or to the landscape; using extra many panes of glass in order to communicate visual and figurative transparency of a governmental building; or reducing barriers in a shopping mall does not mean integration into the community, transparency of events, or effective participation. In his publication *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (orig. 1975), Michel Foucault interpreted and fundamentally questioned the public – based on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon – as an apparatus (*dispositif*) of power. The current developments (control and privatization of public spaces, the enforcement of domesticated public policies, spying by secret services and social media organizations) testify to his view.

However, is the rigorous confrontation of the private and public sphere the right thing to do? Would it be better to further differentiate these realities? According to Georg Simmel’s understanding of the public sphere (see *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, orig. 1908, chapter 5), the public emerges from knowing and sharing with others a secret: “All relationships of human beings obviously rest on their knowing something about one another.” Individuals knowing the secret form a social group, and individuals not knowing this secret feel being and de facto are excluded. Simmel leaves open what the particular secret is. It could be esoteric knowledge, such as the knowledge of secret societies, but it could also be knowledge generated in a non-hierarchical discourse, an implicit knowledge (“we have always done it this way”). In addition, a secret could be a practical or common “know-how,” for example in a working environment, shared emotions in a family, shared stories, a “corporate identity,” a shared history or plan for a common future (utopia). Therefore, the “secret” is implied not only in the contents, but also in the structure, that is how the contents are ordered, interwoven, ritualized, and narrated.

The public sphere is ambivalent, since it is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive: integration and isolation, equality and inequality, concordance

and “trust, as the hypothesis for future behavior, which is certain enough thereby to ground practical action” (Simmel). This ambivalence exists even in the smallest unit of the family that is commonly defined as a private sphere: family members generate a secret in the course of their shared life, a familial public sphere that isolates them as “private” from their neighbors and fellow human beings. And even within this familial public sphere there are sub-public spheres of the grown-up partners, children, or of female and male members, which share another secret that isolates them from the other family members as a private sub-group. Looking closer such overlays of public and private can be found on all social layers. Therefore, Simmel’s understanding of the public sphere might be seen as a meta-theory of the public that could bring together many theories. Looking critically into Simmel’s understanding might therefore be very fruitful for the authors of this issue. The question arises, if architecture – as a modulation of experiences, as openings and enclosures, as the offer of potential activities, as the presentation of information and insights, as identification, etc. – could be understood as a medium that discloses or constitutes secrets?

Potential contributions

1. Discussing understandings of the private and public sphere in the architectural theories of the last two centuries.
2. Analyzing examples of the private and public sphere in architecture of the last two centuries.
3. Describing and analyzing overlays of public and private (semi-public) spheres within buildings and urban and rural environments.
4. Deliberating on the urbanity of housing and the habitability of the urban realm.
5. Reflecting on the instrumentalization and mediatization of the public sphere by private initiatives and articulations of private needs in the public sphere.
6. Envisioning prospective theses and concepts of future private and public spheres within the built environment.